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Idaho Transportation Department

Today's News Briefs

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Idaho's Only Passenger Rail Station Nears Opening

SANDPOINT - Jeff Marshall doesn't mince words. Standing in the former waiting room of the 99-year-old Sandpoint train depot, he looks at cracked plaster walls, cobwebs and dusty benches.

"The polite way I have to say it, my job is trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear every day, every trade, every division," Marshall said.

The 32-year veteran of the building trades is project manager of a five-month-long effort to reopen the doors of the Sandpoint train depot, the only operating passenger rail stop in Idaho. Effectively abandoned by Burlington Northern—now Burlington Northern-Santa Fe—25 years ago, time has not been kind to the Gothic-style building, which closed to passengers in 2009.

Turning over a thick chunk of broken terra cotta roof tile in his hands, Marshall said the architecture team had a big job starting at the top of the building, working with material that had long-since ceased to function.

"It failed before 1930, I think," Marshall said. "The beginning of the end of the roof was about 1940."

The effort to revive the station has been paid for with about \$1 million the Idaho Transportation Department gave to BNSF during negotiations leading up to construction of the Sand Creek Byway, which realigned a two-mile-long portion of U.S. Highway 95 onto the peninsula where the station is located. Additionally, work on the North Idaho depot has been rehabilitation, rather than restoration.

"Restoration in a historically registered building is using the exact materials and methods that are here, so how this works is: When you have a building that's condemned or nearly condemned, the structural integrity and weatherization is a priority," Marshall said.

Still, the work crew, from Sandpoint-based Idagon Design Build, has hewed closely to the station's original design, down to minute details like re-creating the look of ammonia-stained, old-growth white oak doors, hand-lathed wood features and refinished original benches.

"You have to use methods like the old guys who put it together," Marshall said.

For instance, screws in the building strip when put to an electric drill and have to be removed with a screwdriver. Getting them into old-growth oak requires using wax.

"They're methods that a lot of young guys have never seen," Marshall added.

Other challenges have been trickier to approach. The original structure, which replaced another station in 1916, was built without electricity. The result was decades of retrofitting with whatever materials and technology were at hand.

"You've got circuits that go nowhere, old wire, undersized wire, outlets that are out of code ... all this cobbled farmer electric in here," Marshall said.

Amtrak, which serves the station through the Empire Builder, a train that links Chicago with Seattle and Portland, Ore., has sent its own engineers to help decipher things like the electrical system; and the building was monitored during construction of the byway to see how nearby work would affect its foundation. The building, which has settled over the course of a century, is also rocked by upwards of 60 trains going by per day. As Boise Weekly toured the depot, no fewer than four trains barreled by, each

sending different frequencies of vibration through the floor and into the walls.

"Everything here is on sand—i.e. 'Sandpoint'—so when the train goes by with the weight of the building on it and the wet sand, it's a giant vibrator," Marshall said. "This building is actually cracked apart and settled and entwined in lots of places."

To secure the walls, Marshall's crew had to drive a lattice of nearly 1,000 long, heavy screws into the brickwork, driving them through the exterior facade and two interior layers of sand bricks—effectively nailing the layers together at intervals of 36 inches (sometimes 18 inches) from platform to eaves.

Because of the complexity of the job and severity of much of the damage, only about a third of the building will be open to passengers. The remainder of the station will stay closed "until someone gets a sack full of money to improve it," Marshall said.

With the work "99 percent done," he said the doors could be open as early as this month.

The updated waiting room, formerly a ladies' "retiring room" is a step back 99 years. The original tiles—porcelain-coated clay subway tiles from Tiffany that would cost about \$150 today—have been scrubbed to gleaming. The terrazzo floor, crushed by workers pushing giant stone rollers a century ago, has been buffed to a shine, and an ADA-compliant bathroom has been installed. Finally, a new brick platform was laid beneath the station's signature awning.

"We have to do some touch up on the metalwork on the windows, an outside paint touch-up, then it's take the tent down, trash out, hang a soap dispenser, do a walkthrough and we're out," Marshall said.